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African theories of meaning in life: A critical assessment

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In this article, I expound and assess two theories of meaning in life informed by the indigenous sub-Saharan African philosophical tradition. According to one view, a life is more meaningful, the more it promotes community with other human persons. According to the other view, a life is more meaningful, the more it promotes vitality in oneself and others. I argue that, at least upon some refinement, both of these African conceptions of meaning merit global consideration from philosophers, but that the vitality approach is more promising than the community one for capturing a wider array of intuitions about what confers meaning on a life. I further argue, however, that there are objections that apply with comparable force to both theories; neither one does a good job of entailing that and explaining why certain types of reason and progress can make a life more meaningful. Although these objections are characteristic of a “modern” Western outlook, I maintain that they are difficult for contemporary African philosophers to ignore, and consider some ways they might respond to the objections.

Analysing African views of life’s meaning

Although it is not prominent, there does exist a body of philosophical literature in English addressing African¹ conceptions of life’s meaning and in those specific terms (or cognate words such as “purpose”, “significance”, or the like). There are some full-length essays devoted to the topic, but more often the careful reader will find sporadic mention of life’s meaning in discussions of other topics such as destiny, culture, or religion.

In this article, I address these discussions using an analytic method. Noting which ideas about meaning in life and related themes are salient in literate African philosophy, I draw on them to construct two theories of what can confer meaning on life, roughly the views that a life is meaningful insofar as it promotes community or vitality. Others have also fastened onto these two theories (or relatives of them) as representative of the African tradition (e.g. Attoe 2019; Mlungwana 2020), but what is particularly new here is the evaluation of them. I point out some strengths of these two theories in the light of intuitions that I expect many readers will share, suggesting that their strengths mean that African accounts of meaning merit global consideration from philosophers, which they have so far not received.

However, I further claim that the two theories have weaknesses that demand attention. There are certain counterexamples to both African views that are typical of a “modern” Western outlook, but that will be found *prima facie* compelling by those from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including by many contemporary African philosophers. Central are intuitions pertaining to reason and progress that are strong when it comes to life’s meaning, even if, as I argue elsewhere (e.g. Metz 2017a; 2017b), they are more dubious in respect of morally right action.

1 By “African” I mean features that are salient on the continent, particularly the large sub-Saharan region. They are properties that have been recurrent in much of Africa and for a long time in a way that they have not been in many other parts of the world. So stated, to count as “African” a feature needs to have been exhibited neither by all African people, nor by only them. For more on the use of geographical labels, see Metz (2015).

I do not conclude at this stage what these counterexamples mean for the African theories of life's meaning. Further reflection needs to consider whether African philosophers may, upon reflection, sensibly reject the intuitions, whether the theoretical resources of the African tradition can ultimately be shown to capture the intuitions, or whether community/vitality should be supplemented (say, with rationality or linearity) in a cross-cultural enrichment making headway towards a theory with global resonance.

In what follows, I first define key terms such as "life's meaning" and provide a big picture of literate African philosophy as it pertains to the topic. I then spell out a communal approach to meaning in life, and provide counterexamples to it that posit non-relational sources of meaning. Next, I expound a vitalist approach, noting that it can probably avoid the counterexamples that were presented to the communal one. Although a vitalist approach is stronger than a communal one as an account of meaning in life, I finally maintain that some further counterexamples apply to both theories and are not easily dismissed.

Background to the meaning in life in African philosophy

In this section I articulate the nature of my project more thoroughly and also delimit its scope. For example, I note the usefulness of a distinction between meaning in life and the meaning of life, and also motivate my choice of African approaches to discuss in the rest of the article.

When speaking of "life's meaning", we might be enquiring into the meaningfulness of the life of a human person, on the one hand, or the life of the entire human species, on the other.² The latter enquiry would involve seeking to answer questions such as whether there is a purpose for which humanity was created, or what the human race as a whole could do to connect with something greater than itself. As is the case in the contemporary Western tradition (on which see Seachris 2013), enquiry into such questions – usefully captured by the phrase the "meaning of life" – is infrequent in the African tradition. Most African philosophers who have discussed meaningfulness have instead been interested in knowing what, if anything, would confer it on the life of a given one of us, which I designate with talk of "meaning in life".

What is involved in thinking about whether and, if so, how the life of an individual can become meaningful? So far as I can tell, African philosophers have not sought to answer that meta-ethical question systematically in English-speaking works. However, I detect no discontinuity between what they have tended to connote about the matter and what their Western counterparts have, and so I draw on analyses of the concept of meaning in life salient in recent Anglo-American philosophy on the topic (especially Metz 2001; 2019a).

First and foremost, talk of "meaning" insofar as it pertains to a person connotes a non-instrumental value, i.e. something good for its own sake and valuable not merely as a means to some further good. Most enquirers want meaning in their lives or the lives of those they care about, not solely because it can bring about something else down the road such as pleasure, but also, and principally, because of the meaning "in itself".

Second, I presume that meaning in a life is present in varying degrees among human persons based in substantial part on their choices, sometimes conceived in terms of purposes to be achieved. For example, African philosophers – like those in the West or indeed in any aged intellectual tradition – tend to hold that the more one donates to charity (of the right sort and in the right way), the more meaningful one's life. They also by and large agree that giving birth to a child and rearing it with love confer some meaning on a life. For a third example, it is uncontested that undertaking labour in order to benefit one's neighbours, such as constructing a building or harvesting a field, is meaningful.

Third, I take it that the relevant choices to make (or at least conditions to exhibit) are characteristically those meriting reactions of substantial esteem or admiration. Continuing with the previous examples, donating to charity, creating a loving family, and working in helpful ways all deserve a sense of pride on the part of the one doing them and approval on the part of others.

² It is possible, though unlikely, that some readers might have in mind still other kinds of life, such as all biological life, including that of insects, on which see Mawson (2016).

The point is not that anyone will necessarily exhibit these emotions in response to meaningful conditions, only that the latter typically call for the former.

Fourth, philosophical enquirers into meaning in life, in the African, Western, and surely most other traditions, would contend that meaning is absent in the thought experiment of “The Experience Machine” (Nozick 1974), and probably is so by definition of terms. It would be conceptually inconsistent, or at the very least substantively implausible, to suppose that meaning could come from passively receiving impressions that one is living a life that one is in fact not. Conceptually, there are no actions performed, at least not ones meriting esteem, and, substantively, one is isolated and inactive.

This analysis of the sense of “meaning in life” should be enough to facilitate enquiry into African reflection on the topic in the philosophical literature. For more than 100 years, Anglo-American philosophers have advanced competing theories of this non-instrumental value that varies in people’s lives largely according to the estimable or admirable choices they make, with some of these views being that it is constituted by: passionately pursuing an ideal (James 1899); making decisions that one believes others should also make (Sartre [1946] 1956); transcending the limits of the self to connect with organic unities (Nozick 1981); improving the quality of life of people and animals (Singer 1995); promoting the exercise of rational nature in exceptional ways (Smith 1997; Gewirth 1998); fulfilling God’s purpose for us, which is to imitate God as much as we can (Cottingham 2005); and enjoying the beatific vision for an eternity (Mawson 2016). These questions arise: what resources are there in the African tradition for a theory of meaning in life?; how would they differ from those in the Western and other traditions?; what are their strengths and weaknesses?; could the strengths give philosophers working in another tradition pause? Normative topics such as good character, right action, and just policy have received the lion’s share of attention from African philosophers, with such questions about meaning in life having received comparatively little (making the special issue of this journal a watershed). Only three generations of literate interpretations of African philosophy have passed (with rough periods being the 1960s to 1970s, 1980s to 1990s, 2000s to 2010s), such that a real body of writing on meaning in life is currently under construction in the emergence of the fourth.

When African philosophers have addressed meaning in life, they have tended to draw on three distinguishable intellectual sources, which are well-known for being prominent in the field much more generally. They are, in catchwords, imperceptibility, vitality, and community. After briefly sketching how imperceptibility broadly figures into African epistemology, metaphysics, and value theory, I explain why I set it aside in the rest of this article.

It is true that many African philosophers believe that there exists a realm of agents who in principle cannot be perceived through the senses, including God, ancestors, the “living-dead” (those whose bodies have recently died), and, then (with more variation depending on the particular culture) potentially also the not-yet-born and other “spirits” with greater powers than us but lesser powers than God. These persons are thought to be in constant interaction with human beings in the perceptible realm, and, indeed, at least ancestors and the living-dead are thought to continue to reside on Earth with us. It is common for African philosophers to maintain that God is the source of norms about how to live and that they can be conveyed to us principally by ancestors, who are in closer touch with God than we can be. And, then, in order for us to know the mind of ancestors, we must use a diviner specially trained in receiving messages from them through trances, dreams, signs from throwing bones, and the like. Some African philosophers have indeed conceived of meaning in life centrally in the light of such considerations (e.g. Makinde 1987; Balogun 2008; Igbafen 2017; Okolie 2019; cf. Wiredu 1992).

In the following, I downplay this approach to knowledge, reality, and normativity, working only with agents in a perceptible realm and thereby considering what many would call a “naturalist” or “secular” approach to the African tradition. I do so mainly because I am ultimately interested in which accounts of meaning in life can be justified to a global audience of philosophers, not merely to those steeped in African cultures, which recommends bracketing highly contested metaphysical claims. Those who have different aims, such as recovering parts of African culture threatened by

colonialism and globalisation, will likely interpret the tradition in some ways differently from the way I do.

One might suspect that any conception of life's meaning shorn of thick ontological commitments would no longer count as African. However, my focus on what is perceptible follows the approach of Kwasi Wiredu (1996) and Kwame Gyekye (1997), in their accounts of moral virtue and political choice that are not only extremely influential, but also ubiquitously accepted as African. If neither God, nor ancestors, nor similar things such as witchcraft and charms must be part of an African understanding of what it is to be a real person or to enact just policy, similar remarks apply to an African theory of what it is to have meaning in life.

Community as central to meaning

Recall from the previous section the examples of uncontroversial sources of meaning in life for the African tradition and just about any long-standing worldview, viz. donating funds to a charity, creating a child and raising it lovingly, and undertaking labour expected to benefit others in society. One thing that stands out about the examples is that they involve positive ways of relating to other persons, the hallmark of community or communal relationship.

Although sometimes a communitarian way of life has been taken to be a mere means to a further end (such as the promotion of life-force in Magesa 1997), other times African philosophers have treated it as something finally valuable or meriting pursuit as an end in itself. The latter approach has grounded a promising account of meaning in life, which, as above, for most enquirers is something good for its own sake. The following passages express the view that communal relationship constitutes (and does not merely cause) meaning in life:

Speaking of his Yoruba people in Nigeria, Segun Gbadegesin (1991, 58) remarks,

[t]he crown of personal life is to be useful to one's community. The meaning of one's life is therefore measured by one's commitment to social ideals and communal existence. The question, "What is your existence for?" (*Kini o wà fún?*) is not always posed. It is posed when a person has been judged to be useless to his/her community. It is therefore a challenge, a call to serve. It presupposes a conception of human existence which sees it as purposeful, and the purpose is to contribute to the totality of the good in the universe. This is achieved by a life of selfless devotion and sacrifice to the communal welfare. Here selfishness and individualism are abhorred.

Providing an interpretation of the indigenous southern African value system of ubuntu (humanness in the Nguni languages there), Gessler Muxe Nkondo (2007, 91) says,

[i]f you asked ubuntu advocates and philosophers: What principles inform and organise your life? What do you live for? What motive force or basic attitude gives your life meaning?... the answers would express commitment to the good of the community in which their identities were formed, and a need to experience their lives as bound up in that of their community.

Monday Igbafen, taking a broader view of sub-Saharan cultures, speaks of "the general African belief that man is created for the purpose of fellowship and mutual help" (2017, 250), and there is, similarly, the Nigerian Igbo theologian Pantaleon Iroegbu's view that "the purpose of our life is community-service and community-belongingness" (2005, 442).³

The language above is principally in terms of "meaning" and "purpose", but sometimes sub-Saharan philosophers, particular those from West Africa, will speak in terms of "destiny". Although understandings of destiny differ, it is roughly the (God-given) communal end that a person is properly disposed to achieve in the light of his particular temperament, abilities, and situation. Gbadegesin is the most prominent advocate of such an approach, remarking that "destiny is construed as the meaning of a person – the purpose for which the individual exists" where "the

³ See also Gbadegesin (1987), Mawere (2010), Ndubisi (2013), and Ikenobe (2017). For empirical reports from Africans who are not philosophers expressing a similar view, see Mason (2013), and Wissing, Khumalo, and Chigeza (2014).

purpose of individual existence is intricately linked with the purpose of social existence, and cannot be adequately grasped outside it” (1991, 58; see also Gbadegesin 2004, esp. 318, 320).

What precisely is involved in fostering community or living a communal existence? Gbadegesin appears to focus exclusively on promoting other people’s good, particularly their well-being.⁴ However, while Nkondo, Igbafe, and Iroegbu do mention caring for others’ quality of life under the headings of “commitment to others’ good”, “help”, and “service”, they mention an additional, distinct way that meaning can come from relating to others. Specifically, they also consider experiencing one’s life as bound up with one’s community, fellowship, and belonging to be sources of meaning in life. These concepts suggest the importance of enjoying a sense of togetherness with others and participating with them on a trusting and voluntary basis, where sharing a life in these ways is plausibly part of what makes a family and collective labour meaningful.

On the basis of these considerations, here is the *communal theory of meaning*:

A human person’s life is more meaningful, the more that she cares for others’ quality of life and shares a way of life with them.

Traditionally, this approach would include the living-dead among those with whom to commune. Without that specification of who can be a site of communal relationship, the communal theory is not unique to the African tradition, in that some Western philosophers have suggested that meaning is constituted by love of human beings (e.g. Wolf 2002; Baggini 2004; Eagleton 2007), where the relevantly broad sort of love is plausibly the combination of caring and sharing (cf. Metz 2019c). However, the view still counts as African (as per note 1 above), since communality is salient in the African philosophical tradition and since the Western is much more individualist (even though it indeed has sprinkles of relationality).

There are a number of different dimensions to weigh when considering how to understand and apply the communal theory. While the view in the first instance directs us to relate communally with (human) persons, it is plausibly understood to include animals, such as pets, too. It is naturally read as prescribing partiality towards those who have already been in communion with us, so that the longer and stronger our bonds, the more meaning we gain from them, and yet there is also the idea that meaning would come from caring for those most in need, whoever and wherever they might be. Still more, obtaining the maximal amount of communion we can is an important consideration, but it is probably the case that the way we promote that goal matters, such that it would presumably not be meaningful for us to foster communion among our in-group by using a seriously anti-social means against an innocent out-group. These complexities of how to balance humans/animals, intimates/strangers, and ends/means are philosophically important, but I do not need to resolve them in order to bring out some of the communal theory’s strengths and weaknesses.

However it is plausibly specified, the communal theory captures well the above three intuitions pertaining to charity, family, and work. When these confer meaning on a life, they plausibly do so in virtue of a person striving to make others better off in a context of togetherness and participation. In addition, this view merits consideration since it captures intuitions about the meaning-conferring power of friendships, clubs, religious organisations, teams, workplaces, neighbourhoods, and civil society groups; they are well construed as instances of caring and sharing.

Furthermore, the communal theory accounts for intuitions about when meaning is lacking. For one group of examples, the Experience Machine, miserliness, solitary confinement, and aggressive competitiveness lack meaning plausibly because caring and sharing are absent; instead, there is indifference or isolation. For another group of examples, consider that rape, slavery, colonialism, ethnic cleansing, and racism are sensibly viewed as lacking meaning because of not merely the absence of caring and sharing, but also the presence of their anti-social opposites, viz. harm and oppression.

4 However, talk of “social ideals” could mean something broader, and I note that elsewhere in his writings Gbadegesin (1991, 65) appeals to the idea that a person is “expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole”, as something distinct from striving to achieve the good of all.

In the light of the ability to entail and explain an array of particular cases in which there is intuitively meaning or intuitively not, I submit that the communal theory is a strong contender for a general account of meaningfulness. However, I doubt that it is the strongest of the accounts on offer from the African tradition, since it has real difficulty capturing a variety of intuitions about respects in which meaning appears not to be other-regarding (or relational) and instead to be self-regarding. For several kinds of examples, it appears that, contra the communal theory, some meaning in life could come from these conditions: cultivating a garden or learning an instrument; climbing Mount Everest or completing a triathlon; overcoming mental illnesses such as addiction, depression, and weakness of will; exhibiting virtues such as courage, perseverance, and patience; and being authentic or true to oneself.⁵

Those inclined to hold the communal theory will naturally propose that, although these conditions appear non-relational, upon reflection they can be seen to serve other-regarding purposes. For example, if one learned an instrument, one could play music for others, and if one overcame depression, one could then do much more to help others.

However, I submit that these considerations go only so far, failing to capture meaningfulness in its entirety. While it is surely correct to say that *more* meaning would come from these activities if they involved caring and sharing, I submit that *some* meaning would remain if they did not. Even if one never played one's music for others, there would plausibly be a positive degree of meaning to be had from it, surely more than if one took a bath, ate doughnuts, and watched sit-coms (even if all done at the same time). The meaningfulness of pushing oneself to overcome obstacles and make achievements such as climbing a mountain are also implausibly exhausted by other-regard; even if one had no one to share the accomplishment with, it would be sensible for one to feel pride upon reaching the top. And, then, it appears that meaning could well come from being authentic in ways that precisely involve refusing to commune as much as one could have; imagine the stereotypical 1950s American housewife breaking out of her role that she finds stifling, and thereby doing somewhat less for her family as a result of demanding that chores be shared and that she be allowed to pursue a career or hobbies on her own (cf. Wolf 2010).

In sum, community captures a lot of what I expect are readers' intuitions about what can and cannot confer meaning on a life, but it has real trouble making sense of respects in which meaning can come in self-regarding ways. Another way to put the point is that a proverbial Robinson Crusoe could have some meaning in his life.⁶ Imagine a person shipwrecked on a deserted island who initially believes against all the evidence that he will be rescued soon, runs in terror from the wild warthogs, makes do with an undecorated cave for shelter, gets addicted to an indigenous plant, and hates himself. Now, in contrast, imagine that this person has successfully accepted that rescue is unlikely, striven to battle the warthogs with courage, fashioned a shelter using trees in a creative way, shaken off his addiction, and become compassionate toward himself. Surely, the meaningfulness of his life has increased over time, despite not having been in a position to commune with others. Even if one maintains that it is impossible for a person ever to be alone (by some African ontologies, we are necessarily in relation and specifically with imperceptible agents), it is implausible to think that the meaning is entirely constituted by relational properties, a point that vitality does a better job of capturing.

Vitality as central to meaning

Although literate African philosophy is characteristically communal and more broadly relational, there are resources in the tradition that can be used to account for more individualist intuitions about what is good for its own sake. In particular, another major strain of African normative thought

5 I find these counterexamples to the communal theory more powerful than the key one from Attoe (2019), according to which a life could be more meaningful for tasting food from around the world (see also Hooker 2008 for a related case, albeit without reference to the African tradition). I agree that this project would make life more worth living, but I take that to be distinct from meaning in life, which is characteristically about what merits great esteem or admiration. In addition, I believe these objections are stronger than the criticism that the communal theory objectionably entails that intimates always take priority over strangers when it comes to meaning in life. One version of the communal theory would have that implication, but other, more impartial interpretations of the view are possible.

6 The next two sentences have been cribbed from Metz (2019b).

appeals to the fundamental value of vital- or life-force. Traditionally, it has been conceived as being an imperceptible energy that has come from God and that inheres in everything in the universe in varying degrees and complexities. However, an appeal to vitality to ground a theory of meaning in life is powerful even if it is understood in strictly perceptible or physical terms, which I shall sometimes call “liveliness”. Working with the category of liveliness, some individuals, such as humans and animals, can exhibit it, while others, such as rocks and pens, cannot.

A number of philosophers have appealed to vitality, and specifically vital-force, to ground certain moral categories. For example, some have maintained that the more vital-force a being has, the greater its moral status (e.g. Etieyibo 2017), while others have contended that immoral acts are those reducing vital-force (e.g. Kasenene 1994; Magesa 1997). When it comes to life’s meaning, in contrast, the prominent thought is that the more one promotes vitality, whether a divine vital-force or a physical liveliness, the greater the meaningfulness of one’s life. The following passages express this sort of approach to life’s meaning:

K. C. Anyanwu (1987a, 37), an Igbo philosopher from Nigeria, says of sub-Saharan peoples,

[t]o believe “only in a God who could dance”, in Zarathustra’s words, is equivalent to believing (in African thought) only in that ultimate reality that can be personally experienced and lived; an ultimate reality that saves the African from the absurdity or meaninglessness of life. The ultimate reality in African thought would be valueless if that reality did not embody the Life-Force itself...Life is the supreme value, and it is valued through the process of living. And if the ultimate reality were divorced from the process of living, life would cease to be creative.

Harvey Sindima, a Malawian philosopher of religion, says of a sub-Saharan worldview, “[t]he African world is concerned with fullness of life, since it is in its fullness that life’s meaning is realized. Fullness of life is realized when human potential and possibilities are allowed to reach their maximum (1989, 544; see also 546–548).

Noah Dzobo (1992, 227, 230), a Ghanaian philosopher, is the most detailed about how vitality might be relevant to meaning in life:

there is an urge or dynamic creative energy in life...which works towards wholeness and healing, towards building up and not pulling down...Our people therefore conceive human life as a force or power that continuously recreates itself and so is characterized by continuous change and growth which depends upon its own inner source of power...Since the essence of the ideal life is regarded as power and creativity, growth, creative work and increase have become essential values. Powerlessness or loss of vitality, unproductive living, and growthlessness become ultimate evils in our indigenous culture. For many Africans one of man’s chief ends...is to multiply and increase, because he is the repository of the life force...The second greatest end of man is to live productively, i.e. to work, because work is considered as the only way of realizing one’s creative potential...Life becomes meaningful and worth living because of the dynamic creative energy that is lodged at the heart of human existence.⁷

Sometimes the focus is on developing vitality in oneself, traditionally to the point where one’s vital-force is so strong as to become an ancestor. Other times the thought is that one should foster vitality in others in order to live meaningfully, such that one’s purpose is to produce in them properties such as health, growth, reproduction, creativity, vibrancy, activity, self-motion, courage, and confidence. Correspondingly, one’s purpose is also to reduce in others properties that include disease, decay, barrenness, destruction, lethargy, passivity, submission, insecurity, and depression. I suppose here that the most promising account of meaning includes both oneself and others as relevant sites of liveliness.

Consider, then, the *vitalist theory of meaning*:

7 For similar views, see Tempels (1959), Anyanwu (1984; 1987b), and discussion of Alexis Kagame’s views in Kagabo (2004).

A human person's life is more meaningful, the more that she promotes liveliness in herself and others.

The strengths of this view are patent. First off, return to the three uncontroversial cases of meaningfulness pertaining to charity, family, and work. Beneficence is likely to enhance others' liveliness, e.g. their health, and, as per Dzobo's remarks above, procreation is the production of a new life and labour is an instance of creative energy. The vitalist theory provides explanations of these cases that powerfully (so to speak) rival the communal theory.

Vitality also makes some good sense of the meaningfulness of friendships, clubs, and the like, insofar as participation in them is expected to make people more active and feel stronger. Relationships appear meaningful particularly when there is a mutual enlivening between people, where loneliness is normally stultifying as opposed to stimulating.⁸

Still more, the vitalist theory also reasonably accounts for the above intuitions about when meaning is lacking. People living in an Experience Machine or in solitary confinement are simply not lively, let alone making others lively. In addition, extremely immoral acts such as rape and slavery can be expected to reduce others' vitality – after all, “continuous change and growth which depends upon its own inner source of power” is hardly forthcoming consequent to such treatment.

Finally, for now, the vitalist theory avoids, and even plausibly explains, the objections facing the communal theory. Recall that I argued that the following are intuitively sources of meaning that do not seem to be a function of communal relationship with other persons, at least not entirely: producing aesthetic objects; developing athleticism; overcoming mental illness; exhibiting virtues such as courage and strength of will; and being true to oneself. One readily sees how an individual's liveliness is plausibly central to all of these conditions.

It appears, then, that the vitalist theory captures most, if not all, of the advantages of the communal theory while avoiding the latter's disadvantages. In addition, I note that it is hard to find a similar approach expounded by anyone in contemporary Anglo-American philosophy of life's meaning, which has become large over the past 40 years; nothing like it is mentioned in overviews of that field (Metz 2013a; 2020; Seachris 2020).⁹ I therefore believe that the vitalist theory is a particularly noteworthy contribution from Africa to global thought about what makes life meaningful. It especially merits being put into cross-cultural dialogue with other approaches from around the world.¹⁰

Objections to both African theories of life's meaning

Despite the attractiveness of the vitalist theory, there are reasons for thinking that neither it nor the communal theory is sufficiently comprehensive. Here are four intuitions that readers from a variety of intellectual backgrounds will share about what would confer meaning on a life that are not easily captured by considerations of either vitality or community.

First, think about how false beliefs about the nature of the world in which one lives can reduce a life's meaning.¹¹ There is something sad about members of Heaven's Gate, a cult in the United States whose members killed themselves in the belief that only suicide would take them to a spacecraft trailing the Hale-Bopp Comet that would, in turn, carry them to paradise. Or consider schizophrenics who incorrectly think that the devil is controlling their lives. The reaction of pity that I presume the reader has is well explained (in part) by the idea that false beliefs about the fundamental nature of our environment reduce the meaningfulness of a life. A person's life seems less meaningful to some

8 However, Mlungwana (2020) and an anonymous referee suggest that the promotion of vitality fails to exhaust the meaningful nature of these kinds of relationships. In particular they suggest that enjoying a sense of togetherness and participating in rituals can be meaningful “in themselves” apart from considerations of liveliness. In this, they are probably correct. However, if the vitalist theory plausibly captures much (even if not all) of what makes relationships meaning-conferring, while neatly avoiding the communal theory's serious disadvantages, then it is the stronger of the two.

9 Though, interestingly, Friedrich Nietzsche can be viewed as advancing something like it.

10 For example, where Africans see vitality, Westerners will see agency. It would be well worth considering which property better accounts for intuitively meaningful conditions such as creativity, mental health, and courage.

11 The rest of this paragraph borrows from Metz (2019b).

degree, the more he fails to understand, and especially the more he is misguided about, the basics of the world and his place in it. However, such failure to understand need not undercut vitality or community.

In reply, one might suspect that the harmful results in these cases are telling, and specifically that they suggest that the losses of meaning come from the reductions of liveliness. One might think that the meaningfulness is constituted by the death that came in the wake of belief in aliens who do not exist and by the harm to self or others (likely) to come from thinking the devil is directing one's life. Relatedly, when false beliefs are about matters that do not affect one's vitality, such as that there are 184 craters on the moon, there intuitively is no reduction in meaning.

While I accept that actual (and perhaps expected) harm is part of what accounts for the loss of meaningfulness in the Hale-Bopp and schizophrenia cases, I do not think it is the entire explanation of them; part of what is relevant is what the false belief is about, apart from the belief's causal influence on other parts of a life. To see that, consider a case of false belief that does not reduce liveliness, is not likely to reduce it, and might even produce it. If one had radically mistaken views about the origin of the human species, say, one believed that we were put here by the Flying Spaghetti Monster 10 000 years ago, I submit that one's life would be somewhat less meaningful because of that, even if we suppose that no harm came from this belief and that only good feelings sprang from it. The plausible difference between a belief about the origin of the species, on the one hand, and a belief about the number of craters on the moon, on the other, is that the former is about fundamental facets of ourselves, while the latter is not (on which see Metz 2013b). That is, facts about the origin of the species account for much else about the nature and development of humanity, whereas those about the number of moon craters do not.

For a second, related objection to the African theories of life's meaning, consider the intuitive importance of certain true beliefs. Charles Darwin's defence of the theory of natural selection conferred great meaning on his life, most plausibly in virtue of what the theory is about, and not so much whether it has made (or had been likely to make) people more healthy, creative, or the like. Indeed, it is reasonable to suspect that Darwin's "dangerous idea" made people feel insecure and anxious to a degree much greater than it provided comfort and reassurance. Even so, it was important knowledge. Similarly, if a cosmologist were to make a conclusive finding about the fate of the physical universe, e.g. whether it will forever expand, someday contract into a singularity, or rip apart, the discovery would confer substantial meaning on her life, and we would have that intuition not knowing anything about the effects of her revelation on people's liveliness, or even upon supposing her answer would depress lots of people. We would also have that intuition not knowing anything about the influence of her finding on the extent to which people share a way of life or care for one another's quality of life, or even supposing it tended to put some distance between them. To be sure, depression and distance would count as reductions of meaning, but the point is that discovering the fate of the universe would retain substantial meaning.

Part of what is revealing about the cosmology case is a function of *what the belief is about*, which is distinct from vitality or community, but another part of it is the fact it involves a *discovery*, which grounds a third objection to the African theories of meaning in life. A third intuition that many readers will have is that some meaning inheres in being the first to make a certain kind of achievement. For another instance in which it is not merely what was discovered that can confer meaning, but also *making a discovery*, consider Albert Einstein's revelation that space and time are affected by the mass of objects in them. He was the first person, if not to have conceptualised general relativity, then at least to have provided a solid justification of it. Making that breakthrough was meaningful, not merely because of what it was about (as per the previous point), but also because of its novelty. Einstein *advanced* our understanding of the nature of reality, as have those who have recently discovered species of hominids (*viz. Homo naledi* and *Australopithecus sediba*). It is hard to see how either vitality qua liveliness or community qua caring and sharing can explain the importance of novelty relative to what other enquirers have done in the past.

One might reply that making such discoveries required enormous amounts of effort and creativity to achieve. One could also point out that having made such discoveries would give those who made

them strong feelings of pride and excite many others who learn of the discoveries. These two points direct us to find meaning in the vitalist causes and effects of accomplishments.

However, I argue that it is the accomplishments themselves, and not merely their vitalist causes and effects, that also bear real meaning. To begin to see that, imagine that 50 years later someone had duplicated everything Einstein had done to establish general relativity. Suppose the person had never heard of Einstein and his theory, and ended up coincidentally replicating Einstein's work. The very same effort and creativity might well have gone into this person's project, which would of course in some ways be impressive, but it would not have been as important as Einstein's, since his came first.

Now, turning from the lively causes to the lively effects of making a discovery, consider the discovery as something distinct from the belief that a discovery has been made. The false belief that a discovery has been made would be sufficient to produce feelings of pride and excitement, and one could imagine that the false belief were to persist for some time. These feelings would not be meaningful, however, since they would not be a function of an actual discovery. Conversely, one could in fact make a discovery without knowing it. Even if one lacked the true belief that one had advanced knowledge, and hence also lacked accompanying feelings of pride or excitement, one could have done something important. I accept that realising one has made a discovery and taking pride in having done so would enhance its meaning to some degree, but these thought experiments reveal that there is meaning in the discovery itself, and not merely in feelings that may or may not accompany it.

A fourth and, for now, final criticism of the African theories of meaning in life is that the overall pattern of a life can affect its meaningfulness. Specifically, a repetitive life is pro tanto less meaningful than one without much repetition, but considerations of neither vitality nor community seem able to explain this point. The issue is illustrated well by the movie *Groundhog Day*, in which the main character performs the same good deeds, such as rescuing a child and playing the piano, day after day for many months. While the virtue is meaning-conferring to some degree, one message of the film is that his life would be better, and presumably for being more meaningful, if he were instead to do a variety of good deeds or help others in a developmental way of some kind. A related intuition is that a life is more desirable, again presumably because more meaningful, if it ends on a high note (for analysis, see Slote 1983; Kamm 2003). Holding constant the sum of the parts of a life, it is somewhat more meaningful for one's life to get better over time than to get worse. Again, neither vitality nor community seems relevant to considerations of how a life is structured over large stretches of time.

It would be reasonable to reply that being aware of repetitiveness would enervate one. Remembering that one has done the same thing over and over would make it hard to feel alive upon doing it yet again. The point merits consideration.

However, there is again a distinction to be drawn between one's life repeating and being aware that one's life is repeating, and between one's life improving and being aware that one's life is improving, where it is the repetition or improvement itself that is particularly relevant. Suppose one were to repeat major stretches of one's life without knowing that one is doing so. Perhaps one has Alzheimer's and cannot remember, or maybe a Cartesian evil demon is tricking one. Since one does not remember having performed the activities before, boredom and related negative psychological reactions would not be expected, and, yet, for many readers there will be less meaning upon the activities being performed again and less meaning in the life considered as a whole, too (for considered reflection on this thought experiment, see Blumenfeld 2009). Conversely, suppose one is making headway on a project, but one does not realise it. Even if it feels like one has been merely banging one's head against a wall, if there has in fact been development, that matters. When one later realises that there has been improvement over time, it is implausible to suggest that the meaning arises only then – instead, the natural thing to say is that one then apprehends meaningfulness that was already there.

The first two counterexamples to the African theories maintain that theoretical reason, and probably in the form of understanding fundamental features of human nature and its environment, can be a source of meaning in life. African philosophers by and large eschew knowledge for its own

sake, holding that knowledge and related epistemic conditions such as understanding and truth merit pursuit only if one can expect some practical benefit to come (for discussion and citations, see Metz 2009). However, the counterexamples to such an approach are difficult to dismiss. Is there really no loss of meaning insofar as one, say, believes that a Flying Spaghetti Monster created us not long ago? Was there really nothing to admire about Darwin's life simply in virtue of his deep insight into how humanity arose?

Much of the force of the last two counterexamples turns on an appeal to the importance of progress. Being the first to have made a certain accomplishment and living in a way that consistently improves until the end are both well understood as kinds of advancement. African philosophers do of course distinguish between better and worse ways of living for human beings, and so are committed to maintaining that a human life can usually admit of improvement. However, that point is different from prizing original contributions or linear development in a person's life as meaning-conferring.

Both theoretical reason and progress are characteristically Western, and specifically modern,¹² values (for a notorious statement, see Husserl 1935). Although these two values are salient in the modern Western tradition, it does not follow that they are parochial, just as the fact that vitality is particularly prominent in the African tradition does not mean that it has no wider relevance. In the way that many non-African readers no doubt appreciated the force (so to speak) of liveliness as a potential ground of meaning in life, so many African readers feel the pull of the counterexamples presented to the communal theory and the vitalist theory. Our intuitions do not invariably fall in line with our theoretical commitments.

Conclusion

I have offered two secular and theoretical interpretations of characteristically African ideas relevant to what might make a life meaningful. According to one view, a life is more meaningful for promoting liveliness, while, according to another, it is for promoting communal relationships. Although I believe the communal theory should be taken seriously as a global competitor, I argued that it has weaknesses that the vitalist theory does not, meaning that the latter is even more deserving of attention than the former. I then argued that there are certain kinds of counterexamples appealing to intuitions about reason and progress that are compelling and difficult for the two African views to accommodate.

I cannot answer here the question of what these counterexamples precisely mean for what to believe. All theories naturally face counterexamples, and so if it were to turn out that the African theories could not in the final analysis avoid them, it would not necessarily be the kiss of death for the theories. They might still be the best of what is on offer relative to competing views around the world, or perhaps they can be shown to have such explanatory strength in other respects that we would be reasonable to revise our intuitions (reflection at a general level could prescribe revising thought at a particular level). Yet another possibility is that, instead of rejecting the African theories in total, we should add on to them in the light of cross-cultural engagement.

The next order of business, however, is to ascertain whether there is some plausible way of understanding vitality or community that can account well for the meaningfulness of certain kinds of reason and progress. It is hard for me to see how the African theories could make sense of these intuitions, but perhaps other enquirers will employ their theoretical reason to advance our understanding of life's meaning in ways that I currently cannot.¹³

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¹² Though one should acknowledge Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* as the *locus classicus* of the view that theoretical reason merits pursuit for its own sake.

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